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MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S HOUSEKEEPING:
THE RHETORIC OF A NEW WOMEN'S REALITY

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition


by
Cynthea Reid Preston
June 1992

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Approved by:


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June 12, 1992
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ABSTRACT

My thesis on Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping shows that Robinson has indeed "control[led] the language out of which the story was made," that a novel increasingly regarded as redefining women's reality matches form to theme. The immense richness, innovative uses, and sheer bulk of the devices at the end of the book greatly parallel its thematic development.

As an alternate women's reality develops form matches theme. Theme and form are inextricably linked in Housekeeping. Robinson's use of rhetorical devices tie thematic ends to the development of language for an alternate women's reality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The creation of this thesis turned out to be more difficult than anticipated, partially due to the fact that I moved over 400 hundred miles away from the school and my graduate committee prior to beginning the thesis. Thanks to my committee chair and friend, Margaret Doane, I was given the encouragement, support and advice needed to continue working. Her support has been invaluable, both emotionally and academically. I could not have anticipated the difficulties of working on this without the contact of others in the academic world. Because of the unselfish help Margaret Doane offered, and the support and input of my committee members, Elinore Partridge and Wendy Smith, I was able to complete this project.

In addition to the support from a distance, my husband, Steve, cheered me on gently and offered the inspiration I needed to continue working. It is wonderful to be treated with the respect and the unconditional love necessary for growth that he offers. My sons, Cole and Ryan, have always been there for me and are part of my motivation for continuing on; hopefully I will be a model for their continuing education. My biggest inspiration has always been my son Clinton, who never had the opportunities to achieve in the academic world but has been my inspiration by

his ability to overcome the impossible and appreciate the truly important things in life: love, family, and friends.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE.....	i
SIGNATURE PAGE	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER 1: LITERARY REVIEW OF CRITICS	1
CHAPTER 2: CREATIVE USES OF STANDARD RHETORICAL DEVICES	24
CHAPTER 3: DEVICES THAT HELP ESTABLISH A NEW REALITY ..	34
WORKS CITED.....	58

CHAPTER 1

LITERARY REVIEW OF CRITICS

Nothing in literature appeals to me more than the rigor with which they [nineteenth-century American writers] fasten on problems of language, of consciousness -- bending form to their purposes, ransacking ordinary speech and common experience.

Marilynne Robinson, New York Times Book Review

Marilynne Robinson's critically acclaimed novel, Housekeeping emerges as an extraordinary piece of literature. The Chicago Tribune states that "Housekeeping is a resounding achievement." Numerous critics extravagantly praise the novel for its attempt to incorporate and venture beyond great American texts to a view that women's reality is fluid, ever-changing, and constantly revised (Meese). The New York Times Book Review says Housekeeping is "so precise, so distilled, so beautiful that one doesn't want to miss any pleasure it might yield." The Washington Post Book World says Housekeeping is "extraordinary." Elizabeth Jane Howard states:

This novel is a winner . . . Like most works of art, it can be savored in layers . . . Ms Robinson uses language so fresh, so direct, so accurate and essential that practically every sentence is worth

close attention. Her humor is of the kind that makes you smile from its truth, and she selects and sifts her perceptions like a poet. This is a novel to prize and reread. (Harper's and Queen, London)

The extremely positive critical acclaim that Marilynne Robinson's novel, Housekeeping, has received shows the impact of this book on the literary world. It has been received enthusiastically by the literary world.

The story tells of two young girls, Ruth and Lucille, who are abandoned by their mother, Helen, when she commits suicide by driving a car into the lake. Helen's father drowned in the same lake when the train on which he was riding left the track and plunged to a watery grave. Ruth and Lucille are left to the care of their widowed grandmother. The girls yearn for details about their heritage from their grandmother, but they only hear repeated vague stories about their grandfather. Their grandmother is as emotionally isolating as their mother had been, leaving the young girls hungry for human bonding and a sense of their past. They live in a world surrounded by senior citizens and are isolated physically and emotionally. The town of Fingerbone is surrounded by mountains, adding to the feeling of isolation.

After their grandmother dies, Ruth and Sylvie are left in the care of their grandmother's sisters-in-law, Misses

Nona and Lily Foster. The two elderly women are frightened of almost everything in Fingerbone; when the opportunity arises, they send for Helen's sister, Sylvie, an itinerant train rider. Immediately upon her arrival, they leave Fingerbone. Sylvie is close to their mother's age and the girls begin with high hopes for Sylvie. They try to find out as much as they can about their past and the past of their family. Sylvie is a free spirit, a wanderer, yet she makes a commitment to stay with Ruth and Lucille.

Sylvie is unusual: her housekeeping is unconventional, to say the least. She disregards traditional housekeeping as it had come to be viewed by society and brings the outdoors inside. Sylvie blends with the forces of nature: cold, wind, and water, without trying to have control over her environment. She has the habits of a transient: sleeping on park benches, sleeping on top of the covers, keeping "her clothes and even her hairbrush and toothpowder in a cardboard box under the bed . . . she always slept clothed, at first with her shoes on, and then, after a month or two, with her shoes under her pillow" (Robinson 103). They had, "crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic. Lucille and [Ruth] stepped through the door from sheer night to sheer night" (99).

Although Lucille and Ruth are initially each other's sole companion, Lucille cannot adapt to the differences in Sylvie, while Ruth becomes more like Sylvie daily. As Ruth

and Lucille approach adolescence, they both choose different paths. Lucille leaves home to live with Miss Royce, the Home Economics teacher, the icon for patriarchal society and the epitome of the symbol for "housekeeping" and "mothering." Ruth feels abandoned once again.

The departure of Lucille opens up possibilities for a relationship between Sylvie and Ruth; plot, theme, and rhetorical devices become more dense and varied as the two visit the lake. To ease the pain Ruth feels, Sylvie suggests that she and Ruth visit a "secret" place, known only to Sylvie. She and Ruth "steal" a small row boat and cross the lake to an abandoned home site Sylvie visits regularly. The "shaded valley, glistening with early morning frost, becomes the setting for Ruth's spiritual struggle and regeneration" (Ravits 655). It is quite a mystical experience for Ruth, one where she comes to accept the forces of nature, death, loss, and memory. She and Sylvie bond and develop a deep but non-traditional mother-daughter relationship based on mutual needs and love. Ruth discovers that her nature is much like Sylvie and begins to accept a new self-awareness.

Sylvie and Ruth spend the night on the lake and jump a train in the morning to get back to Fingerbone. Several people in town see them getting off the train and are sure that Sylvie is not a good influence on Ruth; they believe her influence will make Ruth a transient also. After their

night on the lake, Fingerbone society makes life difficult for Ruth and Sylvie. The sheriff informs Sylvie there will be a hearing; both women realize that Ruth will probably be taken away from Sylvie. They ultimately set the house on fire, for they "had to leave. [Ruth] could not stay, and Sylvie would not stay without [her]. Now truly [they] were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping" (Robinson 209). They crossed the train bridge during the night and the town of Fingerbone is convinced that the lake has yet claimed two more. The closing chapters of the book are filled with a philosophic discussion of the role of family, memory, and loss as Ruth attempts to make sense of a new, female-oriented view of reality.

The book has been extravagantly praised, particularly by feminist critics. They find in it an attempt to write the great American Novel for women. While Robinson begins in the contexts of other American novelists, she moves beyond them to attempt to create a view of reality that relies on change, memory, loss and fluidity as more valid than concrete reality. Language is inextricably interwoven with theme to create this new female view. Robinson herself supports the idea that she has relied on previous authors and makes specific statements about her purposeful use of language as an act of creation:

Nothing in literature appeals to me more than the rigor with which they [the nineteenth-century

American writers, Dickinson, Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, Emerson, and Poe] fasten on problems of language, of consciousness -- bending form to their purposes, ransacking ordinary speech and common experience, rummaging through the exotic and recondite, setting Promethean doubts to hymn tunes, refining popular magazine tales into arabesques, pondering bean fields, celebrating the float and odor of hair, always, to borrow a phrase from Wallace Stevens, in the act of finding what will suffice . . . I believe they wished to declare the intrinsic dignity of all experience and to declare the senses bathed in revelation -- true, serious revelation, the kind that terrifies . . . (Symposium 30)

Robinson clearly shows her belief that language and views of consciousness are joined, and that seemingly common experiences can be the sources of revelation.

Several important critics have been instrumental in identifying the sources of Housekeeping's uniqueness in identifying its thematic richness. Perhaps the most important critic is Martha Ravits, who discusses Housekeeping as the new great American Novel for women; she identifies its roots in nineteenth-century fiction and shows how it goes beyond its "literary 'aunts and uncles'" to establish that transiency is "perhaps the ultimate metaphor

for female transition" (Ravits 666). Barbara Meese devotes a chapter to Housekeeping in her book Crossing the Double-Cross The Practice of Feminist Criticism, and believes that Robinson "maps a shadowy territory between difference and sameness, preparing us for an existence predicated on hope and defined only by uncertainty" (Meese 68). Critic Joan Kirkby says Robinson's women "give up the culturally defined qualities of nurturance, intuition, and compassion and move toward an identification with natural energy and process" (Kirkby 107). Anne-Marie Mallon examines transience and explores how it is necessary for women to achieve transcendence. Thomas Foster contributes an examination of the novel in relation to the public and private spheres of ownership and relationships. The critics have established that Robinson deserves to be recognized as a great novelist.

Martha Ravits' article, "Extending the American Range: Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping" is perhaps the most important and influential article on the work. The article lauds Robinson for her attempt to forge "a bildungsroman about a female protagonist." Ravits discusses the ways in which Robinson's work was influenced by nineteenth-century American writers and how Robinson moves beyond the models set forth for her by literary ancestors. As Ravits demonstrates, the novel is steeped in literary and cultural tradition from the use of literary references of texts (from the "Call me Ishmael" opening of Moby Dick echoed in

Housekeeping's opening "My name is Ruth") to other intentional references. Robinson was particularly influenced by Emily Dickinson and mentions her work in the book when Ruthie must recite "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" in her English class. Like Dickinson, Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman, Robinson adheres to the style of prose and poetry allied "through the rhythms and rhapsodic structures of language" (646).

Ravits reviews the subject of loss of the mother, drawing from psychological and literary references. She uses Adrienne Rich's description of the neglect of this subject in our culture's literature: "The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter is the essential female tragedy. We acknowledge Lear (father-daughter split), Hamlet (son and mother), and Oedipus (son and mother) as embodiments of the human tragedy; but there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture" (Of Woman Born 237). Ravits discusses Robinson's attempts to recognize the need for a mother-daughter quest and uses Ruthie and Sylvie to show not only traditional roles but how she establishes new models.

[Ruthie's] quest and choice is always for the missing mother . . . Ruth as bereaved quester asserts the primacy of the relations to the mother as none of the male orphans so prevalent in American literary history before her have done.

Ishmael, Huck Finn, Isaac McCaslin undertook the struggle for maturity by choosing surrogate fathers. Ruth's quest focuses long overdue attention on the individual's resolution of feelings about the bond to the mother as the primary, requisite step in the ascension to selfhood. (Ravits 648)

Robinson goes beyond the theme her American literary ancestors used in the traditional male rite-of-passage: alienating the young male from the female domain and stressing the need for autonomous self-identity. That there is no such ceremony for females often leads to a lack of selfhood or self-realization. Robinson uses the solitude of the wilderness as a setting for Ruthie's opportunity to establish her own sense of self. She must take a trip across the lake holding the bodies of her relatives to a secluded, abandoned homestead; she there is left alone to resolve her inner crisis near a deserted cabin that "is the crucial psychological locus where the novel's essential themes -- home, mother, abandonment, and continuance -- come together" (657). This is not unlike the wilderness settings long associated with similar male rituals in American fiction ("the departure away from town and all vestiges of civilization into the depths of nature where identity is forged and tested has been a pattern in adventure tales from Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" down to James Dickey's

Deliverance" (654). However, Robinson, Ravits demonstrates, "lifts herself upon the shoulders of literary ancestors to demonstrate that the empowering attribute of self-reliance can be claimed by female as well as male protagonists" (654).

Ravits shows that Robinson's intentional use of the title Housekeeping is ironic because the book is not at all about housekeeping. At the end of the book, the house is even set on fire by Sylvie and Ruth, symbolically destroying part of the expectancy of traditional female identity. Robinson shows "the disquieting effects of a female search for identity and autonomy outside the traditional bounds of domestic life" (662). This is a "disquieting effect" because women must step outside of traditional expectations in order to be able to achieve new and different female identities; different than those that have been imposed by traditional patriarchal society. Ravits has demonstrated that Robinson has successfully forged new territory for the development of female self-identity, and, although it is often a troubling and unknown path, it is a necessary one for female transition.

The very nature of such an unusual story, departing from the traditional text, demands the reader's attention, says Barbara Meese in her chapter "A World of Women: Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping," in Crossing the Double-Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism. The lack of men

in Robinson's book allows her to characterize women's experience in literature separate from their traditional role in affiliation with, or in relation to, men. Care giving and housekeeping, the essence of female reality, are handled by Robinson in unique and innovative new ways.

Meese notes that Robinson gets rid of the biological mother, Helen, early in the novel in order to deal with "mothering" in a new way. Sylvie, the surrogate mother, represents an alternate model as mother. She says Robinson "goes beyond woman's affiliative existence as wife and mother"; her "construction of a world without men . . . permits her to explore the idea of 'woman' and gender roles in essentially female terms" (Meese 59). Robinson shatters current perceptions of motherhood and the nuclear family and shows that existence without men and mothers radically changes the role of women and family life.

Sylvie, the transient, is the only one able to "mother" and have a developed autonomous female identity. It is through her character that Robinson "calls into question the cultural construction of housekeeping and mothering" (59). Sylvie's unconventional housekeeping tends more to the outside than the inside: "Housekeeping becomes a tending to and a nurturing of the exterior world, an opening up of the inside to the outside" (59). Sylvie collects newspapers, stores cans in the parlor, and moves the plum colored davenport to the front yard for an airing out (where it

stays so long it fades). The kitchen has yellowed and chipped paint, cupboard doors off the hinges, soot on the wall and ceiling above the stove, stacked dishes and pans, and a curtain which was half consumed by fire and put out, ironically, with a copy of "Good Housekeeping."

Although Sylvie's housekeeping practices are unorthodox, she fills for Ruthie the most elemental role of mothering; she stays. As Meese shows, "We sense the importance of this gift because Sylvie is an inveterate drifter who feels the tug of every train that comes through the town of Fingerbone. Sylvie is 'love': an elusive essence . . . she is that which can only be desired but never possessed" (60). After Lucille deserts them to live with the Home Economics teacher, Sylvie and Ruth become almost indistinguishable. Meese asserts that Lucille opts for the conventional gender role which women have been stereotyped into and that the sentiments of feminist readers, are against her for conforming to traditional gender roles for women. Much of the strength of what Robinson does is in her innovative approach to women's roles. Her female characters do not:

[Strive for] role reversal where women seize male power in the sociosexual economy . . . Ruthie and Sylvie have only the personal power residing in them as women -- the power to withhold, to create a break in sexual economy by resisting and living

as fugitive (feminist) transients . . . Robinson demonstrates that transience is an exercise of female autonomy, a necessary outcome of woman's refusal to participate in the socially imposed economy of gender roles. (61)

Meese discusses Robinson's attempt to answer life's most basic questions: "what was, what is, what matters, and why . . . Robinson seems implicitly to challenge the tradition of the novel of manner, and particularly manners as windows to morals, to value. Hers is the feminist's most pressing axiological concern -- what is valued and why?" (63). It is the emphasis on value that gives rise to the function of memory in the text. The lake serves as "repository" where nothing is lost; bodies are frozen in time and through memory the dead are restored and resurrected. Meese acknowledges that; "through the narrative record of memory are the dead at once dead and alive" (65). It is through memory that the dead are resurrected and kept alive while still being dead. This reality becomes more true than the normal concrete construct of reality, a concrete one. The incorporation of memory becomes a necessary component for continuance. Meese shows that this new women's awareness prepares women for an existence "predicated on hope and defined only by uncertainty" (68).

Anne-Marie Mallon's article, "Sojourning Women: Homelessness and Transcendence in Housekeeping" says that "homelessness not only is the primary condition of the novel, but also becomes Robinson's metaphor for transcendence" (Mallon 96). She also sees the Book of Ruth as providing an important model because it ties Robinson's novel to fulfillment in the midst of wandering; "It links Ruth to a woman whose refusal to stay safely at home is a pledge of faith in the endurance of the human spirit and the human family" (96). Mallon contends that Housekeeping says that "transience, not fixity, is our natural human condition" (97). Our normal condition should be more like wind and water that constantly change and move freely. Lucille represents the conventional way that women are supposed to think and act. She has the sympathy of the town of Fingerbone behind her; she is the traditional, familiar and reassuring character in the book. Mallon points out that Robinson refuses to let Ruthie follow such a familiar path. Ruth, like her biblical namesake, chooses exile or a link to the only family she knows over home and familiar territory.

The overriding image in the story is water, where life and this story began. Mallon believes "Ruth knows that things that are fluid are also free" (98). Ruth continually returns to the lake, where Mallon contends "only here can she discover and claim her inheritance" (98). Ruth

surrenders to the elements of her environment which allows her to be "freed from the confines of immediate space and time"; this allows Ruth a "transcendent vision of resurrected, reconciled humanity" (98). Mallon believes that the trip to the island and spending the night on the lake is a classic mystical experience where Ruth's renunciation is "shaped by natural rather than theistic energies" (101). This allows Ruthie to come to terms with her own abandonment, to experience a rite-of-passage, to bond with Sylvie, and choose memory over loss. Mallon views Ruth's choice for homelessness as a "realignment with the natural laws of movement and change that allows Ruth to "see that 'what has perished need not be lost.' Indeed, her whole journey testifies to the truth that death is not the final event and loss is not the final word" (104). Mallon's article demonstrates how purposefully Robinson shaped her novel to reflect a different paradigm for women, to redefine women's reality, yet she begins with the most traditional of all literature, the Bible, and moves beyond them to establish new and unique roles and consciousness for women; this consciousness is rooted in our past with an ability to maintain the past through transcendence.

Thomas Foster, in his article "History, Critical Theory, and Women's Social Practices: 'Women's Time' and Housekeeping," contends that the author tries to get the reader to choose between the conventional female role

Lucille chooses or the unconventional role of Ruthie; choosing is a political act of endorsing or rejecting Ruth and Sylvie's transience and defiance of societal norms. Foster's article examines a more political agenda in his review of Robinson's book: public versus private domain, Sylvie as model for the incorporation of male privilege or the freedom to wander, and women's ability to feel comfortable outside the conventional space allotted to women.

Foster points out that early in the novel the grandmother's relation to the town is defined "in terms of her exclusion from access to the public domain" (Foster 86). Ruth, the narrator, says her grandmother looks forward to death because it would result in the execution of her will: "Since [Ruth's] grandmother had a little income and owned her house outright, she always took some satisfaction in thinking ahead to the time when her simple private destiny would intersect with the great public processes of law and finance -- that is, to the time of her death" (Robinson 27). It is only by her death that she can operate in the public domain. She did not believe she had any rights until she died. The grandmother, like Lucille, represents the more traditional role that women have in conventional society. Sylvie rejects the logic of exclusion, as she demonstrates when she "steals" a boat. She takes Ruth to the lake and expects to find a boat tied up. Someone has hidden the

boat, and Sylvie finds this preposterous: "I always put it right back where I find it. I don't care if someone else uses it. You know, so long as they don't damage it" (145). For Sylvie, material things can belong to someone only as long as they use them; distribution would be based on need.

Ruth and Lucille's mother, Helen, Foster demonstrates, "had internalized a masculine concept of individuality as detachment rather than the engagement prominent in the grandmother's behavior," never sharing any details of the girls' father and excluding the children from her private thoughts and emotions" (87). The grandmother withheld any past history of their family from the girls, yet she tended meticulously to housekeeping needs: caring for the home, food, and clothing. Sylvie represented an alternate model, a combination of the mother's and the grandmother's attitude.

Sylvie's housekeeping takes on new meaning as she opens the house to the outdoors. The house accumulates leaves in the corners, "crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic" (Robinson 99). She preferred the lights off in the house because she did not want to invade a world full of darkness. Foster says:

Being inside a lighted room establishes a barrier between those inside and the exterior, making it difficult to see outside; but the lights make it easier for those outside to see in. In this way,

Robinson's novel encodes women's confinement and the masculine privilege of moving freely between the public sphere and the family space. (89)

Sylvie's opening of the house to the outdoors, her sleeping on a park bench, (Ruth and Lucille found her sleeping on the park bench with "her ankles and her arms crossed and a newspaper tented over her face") and "borrowing" a boat which was not hers, demonstrates Sylvie's way of transient living in the public domain (Robinson 105). Sylvie shows the girls how to "feel at home outside the space traditionally assigned to women, rather than participation in the 'reproduction of mothering.'" She is the mother as sister, as companion in becoming, not the mother as role model" (92). It is because of this non-traditional role that Sylvie plays that the town of Fingerbone decides to take Ruth from Sylvie. Foster points out that "the grandmother's house is a text in which it is possible to read traces of the creation of a boundary between public and private fields of endeavor, within which women are confined" (Foster 92). The town of Fingerbone, as represented by most conventional society, is not ready for the altered social structure that Sylvie represents. The positive side to Sylvie's transience is her dedication to family and "openness to the possibility of women remaining transient without leaving the home, without denying their connection to alternative, feminine values" (95).

"An extraordinary work," says Joan Kirkby in praising Housekeeping in her article, "Is There Life After Art? The Metaphysics of Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping." Kirkby views Housekeeping as a "relinquishing of human arts, including housekeeping and society as we have we have known it, and a surrender to the forces of nature" (Kirkby 92). She views the gradual "de-civilizing" and "de-evolution" in the novel as a rejection of patriarchal values, a way of returning to an association with myth and imagery for females.

It is the emphasis on nature that Kirkby concentrates on in her review, the re-ordering of the early 19th-century American authors who were preoccupied with the "interaction of nature and art" (93). The novel's references to water, wind, mountains, decay, death, and ruins attest to the novel's ability to surrender to the forces of nature that the book brings to the forefront. Robinson masterfully and gracefully breaks down housekeeping (as a metaphor for art) that has preoccupied American culture and literature and de-emphasizes society's control over nature. "Much of the book chronicles the de-evolutionary process by which Ruthie, like the Biblical Ruth long deprived of her true home, is de-civilized and quite literally 'naturalized,' drawn back into primal relation with the natural world" (97). Kirkby sees the process as reverse evolution, from patriarchal to matriarchal rule, and finally a return to a state of nature.

Kirkby suggests that the book's establishment of a return to nature, or the "regenerative powers of decay" implies society's need to "liberate itself from institutionalized patterns that have become destructive" and that the book suggests "a sense of connection with natural life and rhythms, and an erotic rather than manipulative attitude to nature" (101). It is this return to nature that is the foundation for the growth allowing women to begin to accept memory (and loss) as part of the natural life cycle, necessary to achieve a new self-awareness.

Robinson achieves such stunningly acclaimed success because theme and form are so inextricably interwoven. In using the most familiar contexts, housekeeping and mothering, Robinson constructs a difference in realities that is strange and challenging to female perspectives; the strangeness of death and reconstruction of memory and loss that challenge women's consciousness to make the strange familiar. My examination will include a thorough look at standard literary devices: diction and how it is used to create visual, auditory, and tactile sensations. The use of personification adds a living, moving feel to descriptions as does her use of repetition and detail. She artfully draws the reader into a dreamlike world, one that seems to move like the wind. Sentence length, particularly short, adjectiveless sentences, directs the reader to clear or didactic statements that move the plot along. Humor, irony,

and understatement add a welcome relief to the intensity of sorrow felt in the book. There are also several standard devices that are used in unusual ways. Similes and metaphors, are frequently, although not exclusively, used to obscure meaning more than they are used to clarify understanding. Her purposeful use of juxtaposition turns meaning upside down and pulls the reader into the dreamlike state of Ruthie and Sylvie. Supposition and series are used to show movement, change and growth. Alliteration is used to negate an image as well as provide contradictory information showing the lack of concrete reality. By far the most unusual device Robinson uses is the negation of certainty. She verbally constructs an image and deconstructs the image with her spectacular use of negation, leaving meaning elusive. In the final pages of the book, Robinson's use of negation of certainty and affirmation of possibility points to the masterful way that language plays into the novel in the construction of meaning, value, memory, loss and an altered female consciousness.

CHAPTER 2

CREATIVE USES OF STANDARD RHETORICAL DEVICES

The language of present experience is so charged with judgment and allusion and intonation that it cannot be put to any new use or forced along any unaccustomed path . . . When I wrote Housekeeping . . . I made a world remote enough to allow me to choose and control the language out of which the story was to be made. It was a shift forced on me by the intractability of the language of contemporary experience.

Marilynne Robinson, "Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy"

Form and theme are inextricably linked in Housekeeping. In the first chapters of the book, up until the time Lucille and Ruthie emotionally part, Robinson's use of devices generally is straightforward. This straightforwardness should not be taken for a lack of brilliance: Robinson's use of language is masterful and varied. Her uses of simile and metaphor, repetition, personification, sentence length and diction all closely match theme and add greatly to the establishment of a dark, dank, cold feeling; relief from this gloom is provided by the injection of irony and humor. By her use of detail, Robinson artfully paints a picture for the reader that is vivid visually, auditorily, and

tactilely. These first chapters have Lucille and Ruthie on what Ravits would label an identity quest not dissimilar from those in male nineteenth-century American novels. Ruthie has not yet begun to construct her new reality for women, and devices, however well used, could be found in similar constructs in other works.

Ruthie and Lucille are searching for a sense of their mother and their roots as the book opens. They have been raised by their grandmother, and -- briefly -- by their great-aunts, Lily and Nona. They yearn to know more about their mother, a woman they remember so vaguely that they debate over the color of her hair. Their initial interest in their Aunt Sylvie lies in the information and insights she presumably would be able to provide about their mother. They do not entirely give up hopes for several chapters that Sylvie will provide them with a reasonably socially acceptable homelife and a knowledge of their pasts. That such a construct of reality is no longer a viable one emerges early in the book, but the girls choose to see what they regard as negative events as aberrations of what they hope is a concrete, patriarchal construct of reality. They do not see the fact that hundreds of people lie dead from a train wreck at the bottom of Fingerbone Lake, that nature is primarily a destructive force as floods and the wind ravage the town, or that all the women they know are widowed or mateless as a normal course of events. Their quest for

identity is founded upon the presumption that factual information about their mother can be discovered, that destruction by nature is unusual, that -- especially in Lucille's case -- true meaning can be found in ascertaining Fingerbone values and living by them. Robinson mirrors the girls' lack of innovation in their search by using devices in standard ways.

The setting and environment are important in the story. Robinson uses repetition and detail to give the reader a feel for the town of Fingerbone. The grandfather wanted to be near mountains, and the town of Fingerbone has a sense of isolation because it is surrounded by mountains. He got on a train and:

He told the ticket agent that he wanted to go to the mountains and the man arranged to have him put off here [Near Fingerbone] . . . there are mountains, uncountable mountains, and where there are not mountains there are hills . . . leaving a number of puzzling margins, as between the mountains as they must have been and the mountains as they are now. (Robinson 4; emphasis added)

The repetition of mountains helps to create a strong sense of isolation and the power of being surrounded by mountains. Except for Helen's driving Bernice's car to Fingerbone, the only description of people coming to and leaving Fingerbone is on the train; this adds to the aura of the remoteness of

the town. This sense of isolation is repeated in the isolation Ruth and Lucille felt as they were growing up, physically and emotionally.

The lake looms as the focal point of the town; it controls the people of Fingerbone in many ways, and Robinson uses a variety of devices to describe it. The lake floods every year, it becomes the depository of many bodies (the train full of passengers, Helen, and as Ruth describes it, "the waters were full of people -- [Ruth and Sylvie] knew the story from [their] childhood)" (172). The lake controlled the weather and created frigid winds. Robinson gives a feel for it in her description of the lake and water. By her use of repetition, detail, and diction she creates not only a visual picture of the lake, but the smell of the water, and chill of cold wind:

It is true that one is always aware of the lake in Fingerbone, or the deeps of the lake, the lightless, airless waters below. When the ground is plowed in the spring, cut and laid open, what exhales from the furrows but that same, sharp, watery smell. The wind is watery . . . and creeks and ditches smell of water unalloyed by any other element. At the foundation is the old lake, which is smothered and nameless and altogether black[,]
. . . the lake of charts and photographs[,]
the lake that rises in the spring. (9)

"Airless waters" are waters that take life from the lungs of people and cause death. The lake has many dead bodies. Words like: "deeps", "lightless", "airless", "cut and laid open", "exhales", "sharp", "smothered", "nameless", and "black" give a foreboding to the lake. It is not depicted in terms that generate life, but rather in images associated with death. The tone is dark and the descriptions of the lake and water elicit cold images of water and wind.

Throughout the book, Robinson's diction creates and molds ideas, solidifies mood, and breaks down images. She often combines repetition with spectacular word choices, such as when Ruth is remembering a night she and Lucille spent out in the woods next to the lake. She uses "apparition", "ghost" and "specters" in the same paragraph along with "darkness in [Ruth's] skull and bowels and bones", "dark", "ruined stronghold", "human boundaries overrun", "dreams", "vanished", "catastrophe", and "haunt" (116). Because of her word choices, the scene has an other-worldly effect, one embedded in death and foreboding. Her use of supernatural terms is repetitious, yet elusive, an effect carried throughout the book. By definition ghosts, apparitions, and specters are elusive, both physically and in concept, and the women's reality Robinson introduces defies precise definition. As a fluid reality, it is like water that is capable of changing properties and like wind that is constantly moving and unpredictable.

Robinson's attention to detail is both humorous and captivating as Ruth describes dinner, which was usually eaten in the dark:

The table would be set with watermelon pickles and canned meats, apples and jelly doughnuts and shoestring potatoes, a block of pre-sliced cheese, a bottle of milk, a bottle of catsup, and raisin bread in a stack. Sylvie liked cold food, sardines aswim in oil, little fruit pies in paper envelopes. (87)

While this probably does not describe the average dinner table in the town of Fingerbone, there is a warm gentleness and thoughtfulness to it. It is a conglomeration of all the favorites, things usually reserved for a picnic or snacking, the sort of meal thrown together on whim and fancy rather than the strict adherence to nutritional food groups that can lead to boredom and conformity. This fits the free spirit of Sylvie, hard to define, hold on to, or grasp.

As Robinson describes the lake during the flood which filled the lower level of the Foster house, she uses personification; this makes the lake seem like a living, moving, creature. Ruth says "the water was beginning to slide away. We could hear the lake groan under the weight of it, for the lake had not yet thawed" (63) or "the lake still thundered and groaned, the flood waters still brimmed and simmered" (70). And as the flood invaded their house

they were forced to live in the upstairs bedroom and "downstairs the flood bumped and fumbled like a blind man in a strange house, but outside it hissed and trickled, like the pressure of water against your eardrums," (65) and "the house flowed around us" (64). Robinson not only describes a scene, she pulls the reader into the scene by her use of detail and diction.

She creates a living, moving, lake by giving human-like qualities to the water. Her description, "we could hear the lake groan" sounds like the description of a living lake that is able to convey the burden it is carrying, a heavy load too burdensome for anything other than the pain and the weight of ice too heavy to support. As she describes "the lake still thundered and groaned" and "brimmed" and "simmered" the reader feels that the lake is ready to do something drastic, that it is capable of warning the residents of Fingerbone that movement and change are occurring. Robinson's descriptive words like, "the flood bumped and fumbled like a blind man in a strange house" make the invading water in the house seem less threatening than the lake water outside of the house that "hissed and trickled, like the pressure of water against your eardrums." Within the sentence the same flood waters have different personalities, one non-threatening and the other frightening and ominous.

While the images portrayed may be of isolation, cold, wind, death, and a sense of loss, Robinson creates tension and then relieves it with irony, understatement, and humor. While the reader may feel the heavy mood of the lake and death, she uses descriptions and word choices that relieve the mood and make it non-ominous. The grandfather's train slid off the track "like a weasel sliding off a rock" (6). The train was depicted as "black and sleek and elegant, and was called the Fireball" (6). The only remaining items to be found from the wreckage were "a seat cushion, a suitcase, and a lettuce" (6). These are not important items or ones that elicit sadness, rather they are sort of comical items to float to the top of the lake after such a spectacular wreck.

Great attention is given to detail, and often that detail relieves the dark mood created. When Ruth's grandfather got off the train in Fingerbone he had a job with the railroad, "At any rate, he went to work at nightfall and walked around until dawn, carrying a lamp. But he was a dutiful and industrious worker, and bound to rise. In no more than a decade he was supervising the loading and unloading of livestock and freight, and in another six years he was assistant to the stationmaster" (5). In a decade! Ten years. Another six years to be assistant! The irony is subtle yet clear, and quite funny. The family story is of death, abandonment and sadness;

Robinson's use of humor lightens the story and offers relief at appropriate times.

Another subtle example of detail and humor appears when the Misses Nona and Lily arrive to take up housekeeping in Fingerbone. Upon arrival, "Their alarm was evident from the first, in the nervous flutter with which they searched their bags and pockets for the little present they had brought (it was a large box of cough drops -- a confection they considered both tasty and salubrious)" (29). Quite a present since the aunts that had never seen Ruth and Lucille, so thoughtful and considerate of what young girls would find "salubrious." Detail and humor contribute to the fullness and richness of the story.

Perhaps Robinson's best use of humor as relief is used when Sylvie and Ruth are going to visit a favorite place of Sylvie's -- an abandoned home site full of imaginary children, a mystical feeling place. There are children hidden in the woods who never appear, yet their presence is felt by both Sylvie and Ruth (it is the reason Sylvie carries crackers in her pocket, to give to the children). Lucille has just left to live with the Home Economics teacher and both Sylvie and Ruthie are feeling sad and abandoned. Ruthie needs to bond with Sylvie since Lucille has left; the reader's heart goes out to this once again deserted young girl. They plan a trip to the abandoned home site. In order to get to this secret place, Sylvie "steals"

a boat; she is outraged that someone has tried to hide the boat. Sylvie says "Can you imagine? I always put it right back where I find it. I don't care if someone else uses it. You know, so long as they don't damage it" (145). As they are paddling out into the lake, the presumed owner of the boat, a fisherman, is yelling at them in rage and throwing rocks, trying to get his boat back. Sylvie tells Ruth to "just ignore him . . . he always acts like that. If he thinks someone's watching him, he just carries on more":

About one hundred yards from the shore she turned the boat toward the north. The man, now back on the beach, was still yelling and dancing his wrath and pitching stones after [them]. 'It's pitiful,' Sylvie said. 'He's going to have a heart attack someday.' 'It must be his boat, [Ruthie] suggested. Sylvie shrugged. 'Or he might just be some sort of lunatic, I'm certainly not going to go back to find out.' (147)

Robinson uses humor and irony in such subtle ways that the reader is gently relieved of the intensity felt throughout the book. Because she skillfully portrays the scene, the reader can visually imagine the man on the shore and almost hear him yelling to get his boat back. Often her injection of humor follows an intensely emotional episode in the book.

Among the techniques used to establish a concrete reality early in the book are the short, declarative,

informative, unemotional sentences. The book begins: "My name is Ruth" (3). As Robinson describes a young Sylvie having her hair fixed by her sisters into "pompadours with ringlets at ear and nape," Sylvie would read magazines and go off and take a nap when she was sleepy, coming down with rumpled hair: "Nothing could induce vanity in her" (11). When Robinson does not want important information to be missed, it is usually in a short sentence. Sylvie is unusual very early in the story, and it is helpful to know how she is different from others. It also helps to understand how much alike Sylvie and Ruth are. Ruth paid little attention to her appearance and the same thing could have been said of Sylvie; they were kindred spirits in many ways; Sylvie says of Ruth, "She's like another sister to me. She's her mother all over again" (182). More is learned about Sylvie as a young girl and her connection to nature, "It was Sylvie who brought in bouquets of flowers" (15). When Robinson wants to make a point very clear, whether it is informative or objective, she gives the information straightforwardly, often in a short sentence, unmasked by detail (6).

Short sentences also convey important emotions, as when Ruth is telling about the woman who lived in the apartment above them: "Bernice loved us" (21). Later in the book when it is becoming obvious to Ruth and Sylvie that the town was going to intervene and take Ruth away, "[Ruth] knew

[they] were doomed," (190) or "Sylvie did not want to lose [Ruth]" (195). Clearly, the two have bonded and have an important "mother-daughter" relationship. Sylvie, the transient, would do whatever it took to stay with Ruth. Robinson does not let important information become lost in long, sentence structures.

Even late in the book when Robinson wants to be very clear and often didactic, she uses short sentences. Sylvie states: "Families should stay together" (186). This statement is crucial to the story and a statement on one of Robinson's themes: the bonding and tie to family, whether from a traditional family complex or a new construction of family based on love, loyalty, and emotional bonding. Or as Ruth describes her mother if she had not died: "She would have remained untransfigured" (198). Without death, she would have been locked into a world of control; one she could not cope with. Robinson often weaves an intricate, elusive picture with her long, windy, descriptive sentences that replicate the fluid reality she is trying to present, yet, when she wants a statement understood clearly, she says it simply, concretely, without adjectives or encumbrances.

CHAPTER 3

DEVICES THAT HELP ESTABLISH A NEW REALITY

The past is a malleable substance, which we work into expressive shapes that in turn shape us. We are creator and creature, as we are in relation to language To find a new language for a new kind of novel is a thing I have long aspired to do.

Marilynne Robinson, "Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy"

After the departure of Lucille to Miss Royce's, Ruthie's bonds with Sylvie grow and the girl begins to realize that her nature is unlike that expected by Fingerbone society. Ruthie and Sylvie go to the lake, and there, as well as after their return, Ruthie philosophizes about the nature of being and reality. She comes to know that the concrete, patriarchal reality of Fingerbone actually is an illusion: Lucille must ignore major evidence in order to convince herself that their mother did not commit suicide or must ignore the fact that the Home Economics teacher she joins is herself an unmarried outcast on whom students play practical jokes. The reality that Ruthie comes to realize is far more genuine and is one filled with loss, an acknowledgment of the destructive qualities of nature, and a knowledge of memory as larger

than present events. Robinson's prose makes it clear that she is purposefully establishing a new construct of reality for women: many of her statements about the nature of a fluid, changing, dreamlike reality filled with memory and loss are surprisingly didactic.

To present this reality, Robinson handles devices in unusual ways. Similes at the beginning paint a concrete picture, and similes later in the book, purposefully obscure meaning. Since similes are primarily used to help create a clear picture in the reader's mind, it is jarring to find similes that purposefully try to make meaning elusive. She also uses juxtaposition and alliteration as devices that leave the reader questioning her meaning. She is forcing new and different ways of looking at the familiar. She purposefully gives contradictory information and uses supposition in series as a way of turning things around and drawing the reader into the dreamlike reality necessary for transcendence. Robinson ends the book with a spectacular use of negation: she constructs an image and then deconstructs the same image immediately. Total confusion is the intent and the effect. Robinson uses these techniques progressively as the story and women's reality go in new and different directions.

At the beginning of the story Ruthie and Lucille are looking for any concrete evidence of their past, stories of their parents, photographs, any memory to help link them to

their past. Once Sylvie arrives in Fingerbone, the differences between Ruthie and Lucille become more apparent. Lucille wants more concrete evidence, (a picture of Sylvie's husband as proof of her marriage). As the girls reach adolescence, a time of questioning and the necessity to find autonomy, there is a definite split. Ruthie's use of imagination is so real that the reader is never quite sure if the image Ruthie is talking about is real or in her imagination, or if the imaginary reality has become real.

One of the things that prompt the split of Lucille and Ruth is Lucille's attempt to make a new dress. They do not know how to sew; Ruth retrieves the dictionary to find the meaning of "pinking shears." The dictionary is full of pressed flowers collected from their grandfather, filed under P for pansies, Q for Queen Anne's lace and R for red roses. Ruth values the flowers for the memory they represent and Lucille "scooped up flowers and crushed them between her palms" (127). Lucille has no use for anything that was not concrete; for Ruth, the memory associated with the pressed flowers was more real than Lucille's reality of daily life. They are both searching for their own identity, yet they both go in different directions. Lucille wants to fit in with conventional society; she wants to dress like the other girls at school and act in socially accepted ways. She is appalled when they find Sylvie asleep on a park bench in the center of town with a newspaper folded over her head

and her ankles crossed. She withdraws from the household -- she demands lights on when they eat meals -- and begins to find other friends. She eventually rebels so strongly to the way Sylvie operates that she leaves home to live with the Home Economics teacher. This all seems like the normal path of a young girl in puberty, yet this is not the direction that Ruth goes. Robinson has used Lucille to represent what is expected of women, their pattern of affiliation with others and confinement within housekeeping and home.

While Lucille goes off to join Fingerbone women, Ruthie stays with Sylvie to discover who she is in a different way; she slowly begins to construct a self-identity not by affiliation but by acknowledging a fluid, changing consciousness, incorporating memory and loss. This new self-identity allows for movement, or wandering as a normal state rather than defining being in terms of "mothering" and "housekeeping." The literary devices that change, that construct a reality then destroy it and then rebuild it, are not unlike Robinson's theme of nature as a building force, then a destructive force: after destruction comes rebuilding or regeneration. One of the ways Robinson establishes this change in women's consciousness with language is her unusual use of similes.

In the beginning of the book, when the girls are looking for the only reality they know, a concrete one,

similes are used in the normal manner. They help to bring the familiar to the unfamiliar, such as when the house is flooded and "Lucille stomped with her feet until the water sloshed against the walls like water carried in a bucket" (64); or Bernice's husband, "Charley, who sat on her porch with his hands on his knees and his belly in his lap, his flesh mottled like sausage" (21) or the description of the weather following the train derailment: "When the sun rose, clouds soaked up the light like a stain. It became colder. The sun rose higher, and the sky grew bright as tin" (7). These create images that are easy to identify with and work to clarify meaning. They bring the familiar to the unfamiliar. If a simile benefits the plot or it is didactic, it is a very concrete simile, helping to further understanding.

Later in the book, Robinson's similes often obscure the meaning: they are illusionary and unconcrete more than they help to clarify. For example when Ruth is talking about burning down the house and contents, "stashed like a brain, a reliquary . . . For even things lost in a house abide, like forgotten sorrows and incipient dreams" (209). This is not helping to form a clear, precise picture and in fact causes mental confusion. Like the following passage, it presents more questions than it answers: "For in fact [Ruthie] wore [Sylvie's] coat like beatitude, and her arms around [Ruthie] were as heartening as mercy" (161). The

reality that Robinson presents is not one which fits neatly and can be explained or held on to. Her use of abstractions as similes makes meaning larger, more complex, and less concrete than readers are accustomed to. Ruthie describes what she supposed her mother might be like if she had lived; for the daughter, death allowed Helen a larger existence. Ruthie says: "She would have remained untransfigured. We would never have known that her calm was as slight as the skin on water, and that her calm sustained her as a coin can float on still water" (198). These similes obscure meaning: what is skin on water and can a coin float on water? Water appears to have no skin on it, and coins do not float. What then is the impression she is attempting to create? Robinson has very interesting diction in her similes: "like beatitude," "skin on water," and "incipient dreams." This makes us look at things that have always seemed quite ordinary in new and different ways; it is a way of questioning our reality and challenging thought processes. This is part of the new fluid reality that is necessary for women to achieve transcendence. The concrete reality that did not answer any questions for Ruth early in the book must be set aside in order to move into a fluid, alternate consciousness. Robinson's use of similes is unique because it parallels the new, unconcrete, awareness that Ruth has attained. She has joined Sylvie in her dreamlike qualities, throwing off normal language boundaries. Robinson's

language and device usage does not allow for a concrete interpretation of the book, making it purposefully inaccessible. It follows a changing, fluid consciousness.

Robinson jarringly juxtaposes disparate terms and images to help shatter customary thought patterns. Juxtaposition, like some of her similes, turns things upside down. It does not contribute to clarifying meaning, but helps the reader to be drawn into the dreamlike, illusionary consciousness we see with Sylvie. The grandmother, for example, "tended [Lucille and Ruthie] with scrupulous care and little confidence " (25). The juxtaposition of these seeming opposites forces the reader to pause and examine how this kind of care could be possible. Ruthie recalls her mother as "a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind" (160); unheard music presumably cannot ring, yet an emotional feeling about Helen is created. As Sylvie and Ruth ride the train across the lake after being on the lake all night long in a little row boat, Ruth observes Sylvie watching the water with an awareness of the death and bodies that are buried in the lake. Ruth lets the reader into her dreamlike remembrance of those lost to the lake: "And below is always the accumulated past, which vanishes but does not vanish, "which perishes and remains" (172). The juxtaposition once again creates an ambiguous reading of meaning into the text, that maybe people can be dead and at the same time still be with you in a very real sense. The

sheriff's visit had made Ruth realize she would probably be taken away from Sylvie; she contemplated the people of Fingerbone, "what with the prevalence of loneliness and religion and the rages and ecstasies they induce, and the closeness of families, violence was inevitable" (177). The juxtaposition of "loneliness" with "religion" and "rages" with "ecstasies," as well as the coupling of "closeness" and "violence" in discussing families, creates a jarring and unexpected emotion. Robinson uses juxtaposition to turn meaning around, to be interpreted in new ways, to force a different awareness of the familiar.

Ruthie recalls Sylvie's return to Fingerbone after being summoned by Misses Lily and Nona. She was aware of the cold and discomfort Sylvie must have felt on that frigid morning. Ruthie remembered that Sylvie "sat there in a wooden chair in the white kitchen, smoothing her borrowed-looking dress and working her feet out of her loafers, sustaining all our stares with "the placid modesty of a virgin who has conceived" (49). A virgin would not have conceived, or she would not be a virgin. Would such a woman have a "placid modesty" or would she be extremely pleased? Or perhaps this woman would be extremely unhappy; perhaps she would be hardly placid that such an event had taken place. As a reader considers the simile, only confusion can result as one image and then another is considered and cast aside as an impossible construct. Robinson does not make

the image or the meaning clear, intentionally. It is her intent to use language to confuse customary thought and the normal understanding of meaning. With the use of juxtaposition, Robinson breaks down the normal construct of reality, much like the forces of nature in the book break down. Death and decay are normal parts of nature, leading to an ongoing cycle of destruction, degeneration, then growth. In nature, there must be death and decay; these are the building blocks for the rebirth that comes each spring after winter has ravaged the countryside, burying any sight of new life under blankets of cold, destructive snow. It is the deconstruction of language meaning that Robinson masters, constructing an environment where the ordinary is questioned and the extraordinary is accepted.

A fascinating aspect of Robinson's writing is her ability to keep the reader off balance or unable to know where loyalties should be. Sympathies are felt for both Ruth and Lucille, even after Lucille leaves home to live with the Home Economics teacher. In a fluid, moving, changing women's reality there are no concrete answers and emotions are simultaneously varied. An interesting way Robinson establishes this is by contradictory information. Ruth Foster's character is based on the story of the Biblical Ruth who is cast out to wander; Ruthie and Sylvie are cast out and forced to leave their home in order to stay together. It is known that Sylvie is a transient and she

tells Ruthie: "It's not the worst thing, Ruthie, drifting. You'll see. You'll see" (210) and Ruth states: "We are drifters" (213). Then Ruth says: "Sylvie and I are not travelers" (216). They are transients, wanderers, drifters, moving like the wind, yet she says they are not travelers. The two don't fit neatly together. This demonstrates the complexity of a new women's consciousness; things don't fit together perfectly, things are out of control, the psyche is full of many contradictions, just as nature is. Nature is a destructive force, and at the same time nature is a building source, one of regeneration.

Another device which subtly helps in the deconstruction of images is Robinson's unusual use of alliteration. Occasionally Robinson uses alliteration to help create the imaginary, dreamlike state that is necessary for Ruth's transcendence into a new women's consciousness. Ruth explains a scene after she had been left alone or abandoned by Sylvie during their trip in the "stolen" boat to the abandoned home site. When she found Sylvie, she opened her coat and pulled a damp, cold Ruthie, "bundling [her] awkwardly against her so that [Ruth's] cheekbone pillowed on her breastbone. She gswayed [them] to some slow song she did not sing, and [Ruth] stayed very still against her" (160; emphasis added). It is easy to imagine the gentle rocking and comforting of a song, but this is to a song that was not sung. An image is created and then negated. The

perceived reality becomes foggy and hard to grasp. This is Ruthie's reality and Robinson uses language and devices like alliteration to create a visual or mental picture, then purposefully and skillfully obscures meaning; she builds a reality, something concrete, and then negates it; the image disappears or is confusing. The intent is to create a feeling off balance, to question, and interrupt normal thought processes.

The use of supposition in series emerges as a primary device for the eventual creation of a woman's reality; Robinson closely matches the use of this device to her characterization of Ruth. Ruth is a dreamy girl throughout the book. Because she has few hard facts about her life, she spends major amounts of time supposing what the past entailed or the future might entail. Initially she hypothesizes about events and people but frequently comes to negate her musings with didactic pronouncements about their fact-based truth or falseness. However, this musing, dreaming quality eventually allows her to hypothesize alternate realities which bring her closer to truth. The use of supposition in series is an ideal vehicle for Robinson's presentation of Ruth as a metaphysical questioner of the nature of reality. Ruth describes life for the Foster females after the grandfather had died:

With him gone they were cut free from the
troublesome possibility of success, recognition,

advancement. They had no reason to look forward, nothing to regret . . . If heaven was to be this world purged of disaster and nuisance, if immortality was to be this life held in poise and arrest, and if this world purged and this life unconsuming could be thought of as world and life restored to their proper natures, it is no wonder that five serene, eventless years lulled my grandmother into forgetting what she should never have forgotten. (13; emphasis added)

Ruthie begins with the concrete reality of her grandfather's death and moves into a more abstract reality of supposition. The series of ifs allows Ruthie to create a possible view of an afterlife, one free of "disaster and nuisance," in which this life is held in "poise and arrest" and we are allowed to be "restored to [our] proper natures." The ifs set up a new highly positive afterlife and pose it as a possibility; such a view actually is untrue, assert words like "lull" and "should never have forgotten." Ruthie, who has been given few ideas about the nature of reality, here sets out some suppositions but quickly announces their lack of truth.

Or Ruth constructs another scenario in her mind as she talks about her grandmother's "rituals of the ordinary as an act of faith":

One day my grandmother must have carried out a basket of sheets to hang in the spring sunlight .

. . [Slay there were two or three inches of hard old snow on the ground, with earth here and there oozing through the broken places, and that there was warmth in the sunlight, when the wind did not blow it all away, and say she stooped breathlessly in her corset to lift up a sodden sheet by its hems, and say that when she had pinned three corners to the lines it began to billow and leap in her hands. . . . (16; emphasis added)

Ruthie is wanting to establish a clear visual picture about events that may or may not have happened. After establishing this as a possible scenario of the past, she goes on to make a direct pronouncement that such acts enabled the woman to be "utter and equal" in her love for her daughters (19). This kind of imagination is necessary for Ruth to find answers to questions no one would answer. Her creation of the dreamlike world is the only place Ruth finds answers and the only place she knows to look is inward. Ruth describes what she thinks may be her grandmother's motivations for asking her granddaughters nothing:

Perhaps from a sense of delicacy my grandmother never asked us anything about our life with our mother. Perhaps she was not curious. Perhaps she was so affronted by Helen's secretive behavior that even now she refused to take notice of it.

Perhaps she did not wish to learn by indirection what Helen did not wish to tell her. (20; emphasis added)

Robinson uses supposition to establish Ruthie's great hunger to know more about her world and to attribute positive motivations to her family's strangeness.

While supposition in series usually show musings followed by a judgment on their accuracy, they reveal Ruthie's yearning and fantasies. In the following passage, Ruth is imagining what she and Lucille might be perceived as when they are truant from school for an extended period:

We in our plaid dresses and orlon sweaters and velveteen shoes . . . might have been marooned survivors of some lost pleasure craft. We and they alone might have escaped the destruction of some sleek train . . . Lucille and I might have been two of a numerous family . . . And they might have been touring legislators or members of a dance band. Then our being there on a bitter morning in ruined and unsuitable clothes, wordlessly looking at the water, would be entirely understandable. . . Perhaps we all awaited a resurrection. Perhaps we expected a train to leap out of the water . . . Say that this resurrection was general enough to include my grandmother, and Helen, my mother. Say that Helen

lifted our hair from our napes . . . Say that my
grandmother pecked our brows with her whiskey lips
. . . Then Lucille and I could run off to the woods.

(96; emphasis added)

Ruthie's desires are fantastic but highly positive as she imagines she and Lucille are "survivors of some lost pleasure craft" or that they "alone might have escaped the destruction of some sleek train." She expresses lots of pleasure, yet yearns to belong to a group whether it be a staid family of legislators or a perhaps more exotic family dance band members. As she dreams she imagines a resurrection of her own family and imagined tender kindnesses. No didactic statement is made to destroy this dreamy world; Ruthie keeps her musings as part of her reality.

Up until this point, Ruthie's musings in supposition in series have been flights of fancy and hope, or constructs of possible realities. In her thoughts about her mother, she probably approaches truth. The more she dreams, the closer she comes to the truth of a fluid female reality. Robinson draws us into Ruth's dreamlike world as she articulates what she imagined would have happened if her mother had not committed suicide:

But if she had simply brought us home again to the high frame apartment building with the scaffolding of stairs, I would not remember her that way. Her

eccentricities might have irked and embarrassed us when we grew older. We might have forgotten her birthday . . . We would have left her finally. We would have laughed together with bitterness and satisfaction at our strangely solitary childhood . . . Then we would telephone her out of guilt and nostalgia . . . We would take her to a restaurant and a movie on Thanksgiving and buy her best-sellers for Christmas. We would try to give her outings and make her find some interests, but she would soften and shrink in our hands, and become infirm. She would bear her infirmities with the same taut patience with which she bore our solicitude . . . and her silence would make us more and more furious, Lucille and I would see each other often, and almost never talk of other things. Nothing would be more familiar to us than her silence, and her sad, abstracted calm. I know how it would have been, because I have observed that, in the way people are strange, they grow stranger. We would have laughed . . . She would have remained untransfigured. We would never have known that her calm was as slight as the skin on water . . . We would have known nothing of the nature and reach of her sorrow if she had come back. But she left us and broke the family and

the sorrow was released and we saw its wings and saw it fly a thousand ways into the hills. (197; emphasis added)

Robinson produces a picture of what it would be like if Helen would have lived: it is filled with both bitterness and satisfaction, loyalty and abandonment, embarrassment and dearness. The repeated use of "we would" emphasizes the conditional quality of these moments: Helen would have had to have remained alive. From everything we know of the family, Ruthie's picture is an accurate one: it describes Helen's strangeness ("[when] people are strange, they grow stranger") as well as deep family loyalties and betrayals. Because of Helen's death, Ruth has a more accurate view of her mother: she knows the true nature of her calm and the "reach of her sorrow." Ruthie's musings, though probably hypothetically accurate, are interrupted by her abrupt knowledge that her mother "left us and broke the family." Although Ruthie approaches a fluid reality, it also includes concrete facts such as her mother's suicide. At the same time, her death allowed her memory to grow, become a more accurate picture of her, and release "the sorrow . . . [which] flies a thousand ways into the hills." As Ruthie draws an accurate picture of her mother, she makes valuable assertions about the power of memory and its role in transcendence.

Her mother becomes more real in memory than she ever was in real life.

If Robinson's construction of women's reality is a fluid, changing consciousness, in many ways undefinable, then the last few pages of her book demonstrate the theme of an elusive, obscured reality. The last two pages create and destroy, build and break down, construct and deconstruct in such a way that the reader questions the nature of what is being read; meaning is as elusive and obscure as wind and water. This fits perfectly with the different women's reality that Robinson presents in the last chapters of the book. The coupling of negation with other devices is absorbing and remarkable.

Ruthie concludes her tale with short statements. Very clearly Robinson does not want the point missed: "All this is fact. Fact explains nothing. On the contrary, it is fact that requires explanation" (217). In concrete reality fact explains everything. In the concrete there is an answer and explanation for everything, and when there is not, the truth is bent to fit concrete reality. In a reality where all is fact, everything is under control. Robinson does not present women's reality as one that is under control; to the contrary, it is out of control: fluid, changeable, and incorporates death and memory as part of the trueness of reality. It does not fit neatly into the world of fact.

At the end of the story Ruthie and Sylvie have been gone from Fingerbone for several years. Lucille now becomes only a part of Ruth's memory, and, as she becomes part of her memory, she is more real to Ruthie than when she was with her. Ruthie, in fantasy, imagines Lucille sitting at a table in a restaurant in Boston (Lucille once said she would leave Fingerbone and live in Boston). Robinson's use of detail draws the reader to this imagined table: "[Lucille] is tastefully dressed -- wearing, say, a tweed suit with an amber scarf at the throat . . . her water glass has left two-thirds of a ring on the table, and she works at completing the circle with her thumbnail" (218). Once Lucille is concretely placed at the table in a restaurant in Boston, Robinson creates and destroys a view of her possible actions:

Sylvie and [Ruth] do not flounce in through the door, smoothing the skirts of [their] oversized coats and combing [their] hair back with [their] fingers. [They] do not sit down at the table next to hers and empty [their] pockets in a small damp heap in the middle of the table, and sort out gum wrappers and ticket stubs, and add up the coins and dollar bills, and laugh and add them up again. (218; emphasis added)

A clear visual picture is created and at the same time that image is not there. Ruth and Sylvie did not "flounce in

through the door," they did not sit at the table next to Lucille, yet the image is right there in front you. The images are detailed and sharp, and then we are told they do not exist. Ruth continues on:

My mother, likewise, is not there, and my grandmother in her house slippers with her pigtail wagging, and my grandfather, with his hair combed flat against his brow, does not examine the menu with studious interest. We are nowhere in Boston. However Lucille may look, she will never find us there, or any trace or sign. We pause nowhere in Boston, even to admire a store window, and the perimeters of our wandering are nowhere. No one watching this woman smear her initials in the steam on her water glass with her first finger, or slip cellophane packets of oyster crackers into her handbag for the sea gulls, could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for [Ruth] and Sylvie. (218)

This use of negation is hard to explain because it purposefully has been made impossible to understand. Robinson creates confusion with her use of negation; obscurity and confusion fit a fluid reality. The book, and especially the ending, is meant to redefine transcendence in

different terms than patriarchal society demands. Memory assumes a larger part of reality than the present. Previous examples have created extended images, philosophies and fantasies before a concrete statement has been made. Here, however, Robinson negates each image as soon as she creates it. There is the continual regeneration of the same image and its repeated destruction. The portrait is exceedingly detailed so that readers see vivid pictures which they immediately are told do not exist. Robinson masterfully creates images that are negated and destroyed, as with "my grandmother in her house slippers with her pigtail wagging." The picture of the grandmother is very concrete, even comical, and a clear visual picture of the grandfather, "with his hair combed flat against his brow" dances before the imagination. Then the image disappears: he "does not examine the menu with studious interest." Does he or doesn't he? The use of repetition is important "We are nowhere in Boston. . . . We pause nowhere [in Boston]. . . and the perimeters of our wandering are nowhere. No one [is] watching" convinces the reader they are not in Boston and at the same time the images are so clear, it seems they are in a restaurant in Boston. What does it mean that Lucille's "thoughts are thronged by our absence, . . . [that] she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for [Ruth] and Sylvie"? The passage is weirdly baffling. Images are presented and disappear, actions are

presented and negated. What Meese calls Robinson's "double gesture" results here in endless meaning: the negation of certainty and the affirmation of possibility -- compels characters and readers alike to unending constructions and deconstructions of what might be. "Language plays a crucial role in the production of meaning and value" (Meese, 67).

In "Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy," Marilynne Robinson sets out what she believes is the central problem of Western literature: it is incapable of innovation and genuine creation because it is locked into an unchanging view of history. She states that the only history we have is a paternalistic one (35) in which each writer can only borrow from previous writers: T.S. Eliot invokes "Shakespeare's Enobarbas's North's Plutarch's Cleopatra on her barge" (34). What we need, Robinson contends, is to break from this view; we need "to find a new language for a new kind of novel" (34). To do this, we must break from our current views of history as male-oriented and fact-based. The creation of newness can come only when the world is examined in terms of a new kind of consciousness. Robinson states that she set Housekeeping "in a world remote enough to allow [her] to choose and control the language out of which the story was to be made" (34). She wishes to break from the "elaborate conventions about how history and human nature are to be described" (34).

Viewed in the context of her own literary criticism, it is clear that Robinson was indeed attempting to write the great American novel for women. Ruth can be seen as a representative of a Western quester who cannot achieve a sense of self as long as she believes in old views of history. It is only when she acknowledges that she must break from a non-viable past and that she has a chance of fulfilling her nature. New perceptions of reality are needed that include women's consciousness; these perceptions are possible only with the creation of a new language. As Ruth explores what Robinson terms "paternalistic" possibilities for reality, Robinson's language is brilliant but is matched to theme: standard world views are matched to standard uses of rhetoric, however well treated. Robinson moves into a view that true consciousness is controlled by the past and memory, that reality possesses an ever-changing fluidity; her language is inextricably interwoven into this reality and in fact determines thought. For her, the "past is a malleable substance . . . [to be worked] into expressive shapes that in turn shape us"; "language . . . [becomes] our own conceptualizing and the store of things conceived" (34). As Robinson's images appear, construct, deconstruct, and reappear altered, new conceptions of reality are born. Through language, Meese asserts, "[Robinson] maps a shadowy territory between difference and

sameness, preparing us for an existence predicated on hope and defined only by uncertainty" (68).

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